



Conferences and Events

## The Retrospective Methods Network

# RMN

## Newsletter

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### Hybrids and Metamorphoses: Aarhus Old Norse Mythology Conference

*26<sup>th</sup>–28<sup>th</sup> November 2022, Prague, Czech Republic*

Adèle Kreager, University of Cambridge

The Aarhus Old Norse Mythology conference is the largest international conference dedicated to the study of Old Norse myth and religion. This year, it was held in Emmaus Monastery in Prague, Czech Republic, from the 26<sup>th</sup> to the 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2022. It was organized by the Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Humanities of the Charles University, with generous support from the University Centre of Excellence (UNCE), the Embassy of Denmark and the Embassy of Norway. The conference focused on hybridisation and metamorphosis, both as motifs that permeate textual and iconographic source material, and as twinned concepts that inform and challenge theoretical approaches to Old Norse mythology (past and present). A central concern addressed was the validity of binary constructs (e.g., human vs non-human, male vs female) as a lens through which to engage with Old Norse worldviews, with speakers offering a variety of frameworks for examining the construction and transgression of categorical borders in mythological narrative, from structuralist analyses to queer theory and affective ecocriticism.

The conference programme brought together established scholars, early career researchers and PhD students from a variety of disciplines and institutions. This confluence generated a great range and depth in presented source material: from the macro-level of recurrent image complexes and phonological evidence spanning wide geographies, to the micro-level of variation between manuscript versions of texts (both primary and secondary). The papers

also traversed a broad temporal spectrum, from pre-Viking Age evidence through to the later medieval transmission and adaptation of mythological motifs, signs and figures. The crossing of borders was therefore just as much a thematic focus within the speakers' papers as it was a defining feature of the intellectual discourse across the conference at large.

Following the welcome address by Vice-Dean Daniel Berounský and the conference organisers, the first session explored motifs of shapeshifting and hybridity through the prisms of embodied emotion and occult space. Carolyne Larrington (University of Oxford) opened the session with a discussion of the intersection between emotionality and hybridity in mythic narrative, an intersection that proves helpful in thinking through concepts of Old Norse divinity. Shared emotionality can produce a partial kinship between humans and gods, though divine emotions tend to be magnified in force and more limited in range. At the same time, divine transformations into animal-forms are accompanied by the actor's abandonment of human ethics, suggesting an intimate relationship between embodiment, emotional life and social transgression. Next, Louise Milne (University of Edinburgh) discussed shapeshifting and dream-cultures in the wider Norse world, unpacking hybrid representations of the occult: visual distortions and an elasticity in scale (e.g., beards so large they span fjords and trees that expand across the whole of Norway) act as markers of the occult in dream-experiences, as do animal

doubles. Timothy Bourns (University College London) then revisited concerns of emotional interiority first broached by Larrington, this time in the context of human-tree hybridity. Analysing *trémenn* ('tree-people') across mythological and legendary narrative, Bourns demonstrated how emotionality is not presented as an exclusively human phenomenon in Old Norse textual worlds and considered how such literary images might inform ideas of selfhood.

The second session foregrounded borders in the divine world: spatio-temporal borders, symbolic borders and taxonomic borders. Sigmund Oehrl (Stockholm University) examined recurring eschatological motifs found on Type B Gotlandic picture stones as evidence for the metamorphic character of the valkyrie figure in early tradition. The iconographic motifs include ships and horses (perhaps reflecting consecutive phases within the afterlife journey), as well as long-necked aquatic birds who accompany (or escort) deceased warriors, thereby supporting the role of valkyries. Oehrl not only addressed metamorphosis in the context of human-bird transformations, but identified potential cultural hybridity in these images of waterfowl: he suggested that late Antique, early Christian iconography associating birds with the afterlife may have influenced the work of Gotlandic artists. The discussion then shifted from image patterns to symbolic systems underpinning narrative, with Jens Peter Schjødt (Aarhus University) vouching for the continued utility of structuralism as a tool for Old Norse mythological analysis. Schjødt provided an overview of the history of structuralism within an Old Norse context, highlighting how an increased interest in diversity eclipsed structuralist analyses from the mid-1990s onwards. He argued that liminality (of which hybridity and metamorphoses are both characteristic) is of central importance in Norse myth, and cannot be properly addressed without structural analyses of a binary kind. Taking a different tack, Judy Quinn (University of Cambridge) drew attention to the surface tensions across mythological texts, exploring the contradictions in mythographic classifications of *jötunn* and *áss*, particularly along the lines

of gendered and divine identity. Quinn highlighted the peculiar position of female giantesses, who are not categorised under a comparable gender-grouping as the *ásynjur* and who can move freely between Jötunheimr and Ásgarðr (their spatial mobility paralleling their classificatory mobility). By contrast, the hybrid genealogy of the Æsir is downplayed, with the patriline continually privileged over the matriline: where the category of *áss* becomes thus overdetermined in its binary opposition to *jötunn*, *ásynja* becomes underdetermined through the absence of its own classificatory binary.

Thursday's final session explored Loki as a figure who embodies, produces and performs hybridity. Ela Sefcikova (Humboldt University of Berlin) drew attention to the utility of queer theory in interrogating some of the binaries encountered in Norse mythology. Like the opposition of *jötunn* and *áss* discussed by Quinn, the binary between heteronormative gender and queerness is constructed, with one pole critically depending on the other for its meaning: thus, heteronormativity is defined through its exclusion of queerness. Analysing the role played by Loki in *Lokasenna*, Sefcikova showed how the poem posits gender norms as unattainable, with all the gods (even the paradigmatic Þórr and Sif) continually deviating from the norms (and therefore revealing themselves as queer hybrids). Henning Kure (independent researcher) then examined the portrait of Loki in *Hyndluljóð*, offering a new reading of stanzas 40–41, which describe Loki's production of monstrous progeny and his consumption of a half-singed woman's heart. Kure suggested that Loki's consumption of the heart should be read within the wider Norse context of the ingestion of bodily matter to alter a consumer's capabilities (e.g., Sigurðr's consumption of Fáfnir's heart) and argued that a qualitative transfer of female capabilities occurs through Loki's act of ingestion. Eating the heart is therefore not the direct cause of Loki's progeny, but rather the process by which Loki acquires the female ability to become pregnant; as such, Kure suggested that Loki is the mother, rather than the father, of Hel.

The second day of the conference opened with a session on ritual and performance,

which explored the cultural functions of two sets of hybrids: human-bird hybrids and human-god hybrids. Rune Hjarnø Rasmussen (Uppsala University) discussed the Óðinn-raven complex as an instance of a wider circum-polar motif, approaching these iconographies through totemism. He suggested that the images are closely related to masking rituals, which serve to exteriorize one's inner corvid and which result in multi-layered, blended identities. Rasmussen further advocated for the continued relevance of such hybrid self-imagery in contemporary contexts, adapting the circum-polar human-bird complex as an eco-totemic symbol for environmental activism. Terry Gunnell (University of Iceland) then considered how human-god hybridity may have been developed as a conscious strategy for consolidating power in the Nordic countries from c. 500 AD onwards, a period of warfare in which tribes gradually transformed into nations. He suggested that the elision of human leader and deity continued across the conversion (though taking different forms), implemented through masking rituals, the construction of sacred genealogies and narrative motifs of kingly rebirth (e.g., Óláfr helgi as Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr).

The fourth session grappled with approaches to source material, focusing particularly on the language that scholars use to discuss Old Norse cultural concepts and processes. Gwendolyn Knight (Stockholm University) addressed the problem of magic as an analytical category when treating medieval sources, underscoring how the term has a shifting, catch-all quality, is invented by outsiders and is defined in exclusion to other terms (such as science and religion). Having outlined the methodological complexities in detecting magic in Old Norse source material, Knight described how she plans to proceed with this research: using a process of textual excavation of a limited corpus, she will engage more with the context-dependent meanings of magic than magic as a stable, cultural concept. Jiří Dynda (Czech Academy of Sciences) then inspected the legitimacy of the concepts of 'pagan survivals' and 'double beliefs' in an Old Norse and Old Russian context, exploring the history of syncretism and anti-syncretism in modern scholarship. He argued that every religion is

syncretic to some degree (and every culture is thereby hybrid), and found that pagan survivals are better understood as neutral lay culture framed in pagan terms than evidence of double beliefs. Adèle Kreager (University of Cambridge) closed the session by foregrounding Old Norse terminologies of transformation. She argued that an examination of lexical choices made by narrators and poets may allow for a more emic perspective on Old Norse conceptions of shapeshifting, as well as affording us insight into generic conventions and narratorial concerns. She found that the Old Norse lexicon of transformation is far richer and more varied than previously acknowledged (with prior scholarship focusing overwhelmingly on the term *hamr*), and examined the overlapping modes of change (and non-change) envisaged in this varied lexicon: metamorphosis, hybridisation and illusion. After this half-day of papers, the speakers were treated to a visit to the National Library at the Clementinum to peruse illuminated and printed manuscripts, followed by a reception at the residence of the Danish Ambassador.

The final day of the conference opened with a poster session, in which Bob van Strijen (University of Oslo) presented his work on Jan de Vries' *Die geistige Welt der Germanen*. His poster and the ensuing discussion explored both textual metamorphosis and political hybridity: he compared passages in different versions of *Die geistige* to evaluate the text's ideological evolution, investigating the potential erasure of National-Socialist traces in the revised text. Session 6 turned on ideas of cosmos and time, treating mythology both as a conceptual world and as a sign system, with papers addressing hybridity at the levels of body and text. John Lindow (University of California, Berkeley) tackled the topic of hybridity through its biological definition, where hybrid refers to the offspring of genetically dissimilar parents. He tracked the expression of genetic hybridity from the figures of Ymir to Loki, and considered how the excessive, multiple and self-proliferating bodies of giants reflect a potential recessive *jötunn* gene. He returned to the suppression of the Æsir's hybridity through patrimonial strategies, touched on earlier in the conference by Quinn, noting that this suppression

ultimately cannot be achieved within the mythic schema. In his paper, Leszek Słupecki (University of Rzeszów) called back to ideas of human-god hybridity broached by Larrington and Gunnell, focusing on concerns of mythic vulnerability and omnipotence through a discussion of the various disabilities of the gods, from Óðinn's eye to Týr's hand and Heimdallr's hearing. Frog (University of Helsinki) then implemented the framework of fractal recursivity to the sign system of Old Norse mythology, exploring how mythic patterns manifest at different orders of scope, transposed into human worlds. Fractal recursivity is particularly helpful for engaging with temporal ideologies, and can be used in conjunction with Bakhtin's concept of the *chronotope* to identify how echoes of events in one temporality are produced in later temporalities, resulting in *chronotope interference*: for instance, the riddle-contest in *Heiðreks saga* parallels the wisdom contest in *Vafþrúðnismál*, both of which close with the same impossible question (what did Óðinn whisper to Baldr on his funeral pyre). This fractal recursivity further transposes other mythic motifs from cosmogonic time into mytho-heroic time: here, for example, the presence of bird-transformation and the framing of an event as aetiologically significant.

The seventh session focused on the hybridisation and metamorphosis of Old Norse mythological ideas through ritual behaviours and later textual traditions. Eldar Heide (Western Norway University of Applied Science) drew on phonological evidence and customs and beliefs across eastern Scandinavia and German-speaking areas to address the late traditions of Óðinn, arguing for the value of this source material in understanding the origins of the god. Heide outlined two late traditions of Óðinn, which he views as closely related: Óðinn as the leader of a raging host (particularly associated with stormy nights and Christmas time) and Óðinn as the recipient of the last sheaf at harvest time. Rather than rejecting these post-medieval traditions, Heide views them as formative in the development of the Old Norse reflex of Óðinn. Rudolf Simek (University of Bonn) delivered the final paper of the conference, exploring the hybridity of

*fornaldarsaga*-characters, such as Bárðr in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (who the saga dubs an *áss* despite his hybrid giant-human genealogy, and who is presented both as a human settler of Iceland and later as a protective spirit) and Ögmundr in *Örvar-Odds saga*, who exhibits clear demonic features and in whom literary allusions from Scandinavian, Arthurian and Classical traditions coalesce. Simek argued that such character hybridity should not be viewed as reflecting strictly religious aims, but rather as a narrative technique of literary integration.

The closing discussion of the conference addressed both practical and theoretical concerns: first, an enthusiasm for the publication of the conference papers was registered, and possible formats and venues were suggested. Then conversation turned to the conference's key terms, metamorphosis and hybridisation, to consider their variety of interpretations and applications across papers: while the definition of metamorphosis appeared to be fairly consistent, hybridity emerged as a more contentious concept, viewed by some speakers as a *synthesis* of elements, and others as a layering of distinct identities (an entity of separate halves). This pertains both to literal motifs of shapeshifting and masking, and to theoretical positions on the nature of binaries. A further through-thread was the coexistence of tripartite systems in the mythology alongside binary ones, which have tended to be pursued less frequently by scholars. Despite the complexities in squaring these simultaneous interpretations and valuations of the 'hybrid', the conference itself demonstrated the heuristic value of the term, revealing transformation, hybridisation and adaptation to be central concepts to think with when examining mythological motifs, ritual practices, Old Norse textuality and narratology, cultural behaviours and worldviews. The conference was very successful in initiating dialogue between methodological approaches and intellectual discourses, as well as bringing varied source material into conversation. The questions raised and themes broached by speakers and attendees will continue to inform scholarly discussion well beyond the conference.